

A really, really bad month for refugees

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September was a really bad month for refugees.

I'm not referring to the fires that ripped through the Moria refugee camp in Greece, leaving thousands of refugees homeless. Or even to the cutting off of aid to Somali refugees in Kenya in order to force them to return to a country still plagued by persecution and hunger. Sadly, humanitarian disasters and *refoulement* of refugees back to dangerous countries have become so routine that they barely qualify as news.

The reason that September was an especially bad month for refugees is rather because last month we were supposed to put an end to the chaotic asylum system under which refugees have to risk their lives in order to save their lives. Under which nearly half of the world's refugees are prisoners in camps. That imposes economic and security costs on the good citizen states that live up to their protection responsibilities. And most fundamentally, that has failed to deliver solutions for at least 10 million refugees in so-called "protracted refugee situations"—refugees who have been waiting an average of 20 years for a solution, with none in sight.

In twin summits in New York in mid-September—a meeting on Monday 19th sponsored by the UN Secretary-General – and a Tuesday 20th pledging conference convened by US President Obama—governments had the chance to agree to a new era of refugee protection. An era of managed flows that would not reward traffickers and smugglers; a system that would fairly share-out responsibility among all states, and operate in a way that was attentive to their security and other interests; and most fundamentally a system that would ensure real, rights-regarding protection to all refugees, allowing them to get on with their lives and contribute to the well-being of the communities that host them.

That did not happen.

The Obama meeting focused on securing stop-gap pledges to resettle Syrian and other refugees. Some countries did pitch in—for example, Argentina and Portugal agreeing to resettle refugees for the first time. But the total number of refugees to be moved to new homes under the Obama plan—less than 3% of the protracted refugee population—is shockingly small. As the President himself conceded, "We're going to have to be honest: it's still not enough—not sufficient for a crisis of this magnitude."

Of the two meetings, though, it was the UN Secretary-General's Monday summit that truly failed to deliver. Following a year in which more attention has been paid to the messy and unfair way in which the global asylum system operates than ever before, this summit presented a golden opportunity to galvanize support for a shift to a managed system of refugee protection. What we got instead was a pious declaration confirming that states *should* do all of the things that the Refugee Convention they've signed already *requires* them to do—with not a single concrete initiative to persuade them to live up to their formal obligations.

States also agreed to return to the table in two years to consider fixing the system. Kicking the ball down the road in this way is unconscionable given the depth of suffering at present—both for refugees and the communities that receive them. It's also a delay that is unwarranted. The UN's refugee agency, UNHCR, demanded and got control of the Secretary-General's meeting even though it apparently had no plan ready to offer states. The delay is to allow the agency to flesh out a vague proposal to convene episodic planning sessions when a major refugee crisis emerges—in essence, just an proposal to have agreements to agree. Without a serious and realistic reform agenda, the two-year delay makes no sense.

Reflecting on her party's recent electoral losses, German Chancellor Angela Merkel conceded that voter anxiety about her decision to allow hundreds of thousands of refugees to enter her country was largely to blame. "If I could, I would turn back time by many, many years to better prepare myself and the whole German government for the situation that reached us unprepared in late summer 2015," she said.

Sadly, September's refugee summits have done nothing to prepare us for the next refugee exodus.

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